

Food 'Security': the need for a new framework for analysis

Written by Monika Barthwal-Datta

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MONIKA BARTHWAL-DATTA, FEB 28 2011

The last global food crisis of 2007-08 should have jolted policymakers across the globe into examining more closely the root causes and consequences of such crises at the local, regional and global levels. Back then, the largely unexpected food crisis fuelled socio-political unrest in more than 30 countries around the world and came in the wake of adverse weather conditions in various key food producing states. In 2011, global food prices have once again returned to make alarming headlines. Analysts far and wide are arguing that we stand at the threshold of yet another global food crisis.

The view is endorsed by the World Bank's recent claim that 44 million people in developing countries have been pushed into poverty since June last year because of the rising food prices.[1] The latter have also been widely cited as a key factor in stoking the fires of socio-political discontent in Tunisia and Egypt (incidentally the world's largest wheat importer) to ground-shifting consequences. In other countries in the region such as Algeria, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, they have added to the simmering anti-government sentiments which have now spilled over onto the streets.

The question arises – why are global security analysts and policymakers not sufficiently engaging with the concept of food security?[2] One reason could be that the concept is rooted in the economics of supply and demand, and has therefore remained the focus of economists, agricultural analysts of differing varieties and scientists working in the area of climate change. While policymakers the world over seem to use the term frequently, the label of 'security' has not necessarily served to lend a meaning to the concept which has much value in the traditional security analysis. Non-traditional security scholars who look beyond military threats to the state to identify a range of other issues which threaten not just the state, but sub-state groups both within and across boundaries, have engaged to an extent with the idea of food security. Nonetheless, this engagement has been rather limited, and involves very little theoretical examination of the concept using the apparatus provided by the existing academic scholarship in the field of International Relations or the sub-field of International Security.

Consequently, even when policymakers in the global security realm speak of food 'security', they are working with an operational understanding embedded in the economic dynamics of supply and demand. This is not to say that the links between state security (i.e. domestic political stability) on the one hand and the threat of political violence in the wake of rising food prices on the other, has not been made. Indeed, this is exactly the context in which policymakers at the national and global level primarily raise concerns around food security today. What is lacking is any concerted effort to grapple with the root causes and wider consequences (including but not limited to the threat of political violence) of spiralling food prices and the greater question of food security in a global security context.

This helps explain why the last global food crisis prompted knee-jerk reactions by food exporting states to rising prices in the form of short to medium-term export restrictions on items such as wheat and rice. India still maintains its controls on sugar, rice and wheat. Russia, the world's third-largest wheat exporter last year, banned all grain exports in August 2010 following the worst drought on record which ravaged crops across the Black Sea region and has yet to lift it. The devastating floods in Eastern Australia have also raised concerns about global supplies of good-quality wheat fit for human consumption.

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The imposition of export restrictions on food items is aimed at stabilising and protecting domestic markets, yet has the inadvertent effect of increasing pressure on commodity prices globally. This further increases the level of difficulty faced by those countries in particular who import food in large quantities and are relatively poor, rendering them unable to cope in the face of rising food prices. Combined with speculation over the prices of commodities in food markets, export restrictions only served to further entrench the food crisis in 2008-09.

Yet another significant, more long-term reaction appears to have been the move to acquire land overseas by relatively rich countries.[3] The average annual expansion of global agricultural land was 4 million hectares before 2008. Before 2009 ended, farmland deals equalling more than 56 million hectares had already been announced, 70% of which were in Africa.[4] While foreign investment in farming by private investors is not a new or recent phenomenon, it is the entry of state-led land deals which is an emerging development in the aftermath of the last food crisis. In Sudan alone, for example, there are now 39 Middle East investors, including the governments of Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as of other countries including South Korea, the UAE and US.[5] In most cases, such deals are yet to manifest themselves in any practical manner. Nonetheless, this is a significant trend, and raises a host of concerns impinging on security perceptions at the local, regional and global levels.[6]

Underpinning these short-sighted attempts to deal with food price rises and perceived vulnerabilities to food shortages, is the lack of a well-developed understanding around what lies at the root of such food crises. Normal supply and demand mechanism – increasing demand for a commodity which is limited in supply, causing reduced stocks and leading to price increases – only tells part of the story. There are several factors at play here, and without an in-depth understanding of these inter-related, multi-causal factors, policymakers and analysts are unlikely to be able to find any realistic, long-term solutions to the dilemmas posed.[7]

For instance, food consumption dynamics cannot be comprehended adequately without a solid understanding and analysis of the interplay between trends such as a globally increasing population (despite an overall slowing rate of growth), rising urbanisation and economic prosperity globally (particularly in countries such as India and China where the middle classes continue to expand), changing diets, and a heightened demand for biofuels. Similarly, the impact of these trends cannot be fully grasped without analysing yet another set of issues which are critical. These include overall declining global agricultural productivity, increasingly scarce resources such as water and arable land, higher production costs and adverse weather conditions in major food producing countries.

Moving away from the state and the direct threat of political violence and instability, there is also the need to focus on how these factors impact communities which rely on agriculture as their way of life. This is particularly relevant for developing countries where farmers are generally poor and land fragmentation is a common reality. These people are at the frontline of any food crisis and often entire families and indeed communities sustained by agricultural practices are devastated during such crises. Also threatened are those living in or on the edge of poverty, spending a critical majority of their incomes on food. In yet another important analysis, questions around structural causes for chronic hunger and malnutrition – again affecting the poorest – also need to be addressed as they are an essential part of ensuring the survival of these sub-state groups, and feed into the greater dynamics at play mentioned above.

These dynamics are complex, and inadvertently affect developing countries more than they do developed states. Ironically, it is in some of the poorest, hungriest countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, that more affluent states such as Saudi Arabia, UK, South Korea and China are buying land or scouring the prospects to do so in order to grow food to feed their populations back home.

As mentioned earlier, the question of food security is being tackled predominantly by economists, scientists and agriculturalists while security studies scholars and policymakers in the field have by and large remained distant from the issue. When a food crisis erupts, it engages those within this community who are concerned with the threat of political instability in a rather limited analysis. Consequently, what is lacking is any solid, theoretically sophisticated understanding of what food security might mean in a global security context. At the empirical level too, there is a glaring gap in the analysis in terms of examining the mechanisms which link the multi-faceted dynamics of food production and consumption on the one hand, and the broader security concerns around states and sub-state groups on the other.

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Recent and ongoing developments in the Middle East have once again brought the question of food security to the forefront of the global security agenda. It is about time security analysts and practitioners took up the challenge of dealing with the idea of food security in order to develop a more tangible understanding of the issue both in terms of theory and practice. Such an effort will inevitably need to be multidisciplinary in nature, and extend beyond the current, underdeveloped inferences made to links between food security and political stability, and generate a fuller, more comprehensive picture of how food dynamics intersect with security at the community, regional and global levels.

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[1] World Bank, 'Food Price Hike Drives 44 Million People into Poverty', Press Release No:2011/333/PREM, February 15 2011. Available at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:22833439~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html>, accessed on February 18 2011.

[2] According to the most recent UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) definition, 'Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.' The majority of the scholarship and analysis on 'food security' is driven by economic, agricultural and climate change-related perspectives, and has emerged and developed around successive FAO definitions over the past few decades. For example, see S. Maxwell, 'Food Security: a post-modern perspective', *Food Policy*, Vol.21, No. 2 (May 1996), pp. 155-170; M. Haile, 'Weather Patterns, Food Security and Humanitarian Response in Sub-Saharan Africa' and P. J. Gregory, J. S. I. Ingram, M. Brklacich, 'Climate Change and Food Security', *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 360, No. 1463, (Nov 2005), pp. 2169-2182 and pp. 2139-2148 respectively, and L. Tweeten, 'The Economics of Global Food Security', *Review of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn – Winter, 1999), pp. 473-488

[3] Foreign land acquisitions by are widely seen as an attempt by 'food-stressed' countries to secure future food supplies for their populations, although other factors motivating these deals reportedly include demand for biofuels (particularly in European countries), non-food agricultural commodities, high expectations of returns from investment in agricultural land in the long term, and emerging carbon markets. For more, see L. Cotula et al., 'Land grab or development opportunity? Agricultural investment and international land deals in Africa',

FAO, IFAD and IIED (2009), available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.170.2590&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, accessed February 21.

[4] World Bank, 2011.

[5] D. Ossevoort, 'The Complications of Food Security and Global Land Acquisitions', Strategic Analysis paper, February 18 2011. Available at <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publications.php>, accessed February 21 2011.

[6] These concerns include (but are not limited to) conflict over land rights; the need to protect communities dependent on agricultural practices for their livelihood and way of life; water scarcity and the overuse of aquifers which cut across international boundaries; sovereignty issues where land has been purchased by foreign governments, and more.

[7] A. Dupont and M. Thirlwell, 'A New Era of Food Insecurity?', *Survival*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2009), p. 88.